**Preface to the Turkish translation: Alienation and reification in the Bosporus**

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The news that comes out of Turkey these days is not uplifting for democrats and republicans. Of course, we all remember the Gezi Park Protests of 2013, but of late, at least in the Western press, we have been reading a lot about the “sultanic” ambitions of your president, the politicization of the judiciary, the political polarisation of society, massive media intimidation and daily violation of human rights. Your president’s recent invectives against so-called intellectuals (like Noam Chomsky) who dare to support the democratic experiments in Kurdistan do not bide well for the future of academic freedom in Turkey. But if the external conditions for a fully democratic, pluralist and free society are not satisfied as yet – and remember with Robert K. Merton (1968: 591-603) that social sciences cannot thrive under dictatorships – everything indicates that there’s strong interest in social theory along the Bosporus and that, if the country has not joined the European Union as yet, Turkish social theorists have joined the global conversation. With this book, I am only too happy to join the local discussions and I hope that they may lead to a further cosmopoliticization of the republic of ideas.

I am obviously delighted with the Turkish translation of *A Philosophical History of German Sociology* (London: Routledge, 2009). I would have preferred a full translation of the two volumes of *Une histoire critique de la sociologie allemande* (Paris: La Découverte, 1997-1998), with footnotes and all, but alas economic constraints are real and, let’s grant it, pragmatism is in itself a form of realism. Moreover, if I had had the time and leisure, I would have added another chapter on Axel Honneth’s (2005) reformulation of reification in recognition-theoretical terms as a deficient relation between self, other and the world, as well on more recent attempts that are inspired by Honneth and that go back to Heidegger (Haber, 2007, Fischbach, 2009) or Wittgenstein (Jaeggi, 2005, Stahl, 2013) to reactualise the theories of alienation and reification.[[2]](#footnote-2)[[3]](#footnote-3)

Notwithstanding the enthusiasm for total critiques of neo-liberal/techno-industrial capitalism, I am afraid that the recent attempts of authors within the Marxist tradition of Left Hegelianism (from Lukács and Korsch to Honneth and Frazer) and Radical Spinozism (from Althusser and Deleuze to Negri and Virno) to refurbish and actualize the theory of reification come too late. The *Zeitgeist* has moved on and, unfortunately, the utopian energies seem largely spent. Due to its heavy metaphysical baggage (the oppositions of essence and appearance, form and content, part and whole, theory and practice that it presupposes) and its grounding in an obsolescent philosophy of history (the grand Marxist narrative of emancipation), the theory of reification has lost its credibility. Somewhere in the eighties, Marxism died as a philosophy of history with metaphysical guarantees. It certainly is no longer the “unsurpassable horizon of our time”, as Sartre claimed in a memorable phrase.[[4]](#footnote-4) The struggle against domination and exploitation continues, of course, but it is more dispersed and can no longer be unified by a master category that authoritatively dismisses democracy, while guaranteeing the final victory. Conceptual historians may well conclude in a not so distant future that the concept reached its zenith in the midst of the twentieth century and became largely obsolete in the twenty first century.

As an encompassing theory with diagnostic intent, the theory of reification connects systemic processes of commodification, exploitation and alienation that lead to a loss of community (anomie), meaning (disenchantment) and freedom (domination) to a phenomenological description of the alienation of the modern self. The connection of the global and the local, the social structure and lived experience, the external and the external is problematic, however. It has all the trappings of a highly speculative essay by a young sociology student who wants to demonstrate his cognitive potentials or her radical credentials. It’s not exactly the equivalent of a sociological Rorschach test, but it is not “grounded theory” either. As a critical category, reification squarely ascribes the blame of alienation to the system. Like hell, reification, *c’est les autres*. The denunciation of reification is paradoxical: to the extent that it presupposes that the object is really a subject, it denies what it affirms (that the world is inhuman) and affirms what it denies (namely that there still is a subject that can act and change the world).

I would rather start with the affirmation of the denial and bet on the transformative capacities of the subject. Unconvinced by the litany of denunci­ations of domination and oppression that has become the hallmark of critical theory, I have grown increasingly tired of hypercritiques of the present. Not that I want to deny that the current state of the world is rather worrisome and depressing. Look at Europe! Look at Turkey! Look at Syria! But painting black on grey is not helpful either. The techno-capitalist world has indeed become an ‘iron cage’, as Max Weber intimated in the final pages of *The Protestant Ethic*, but precisely because we are going through ‘dark times’ once again, we desperately need to open a little window on the world and let in some light and colours to illuminate our caged existence.

In my most recent book, *What’s Critical about Critical Realism? Essays in Reconstructive Social Theory* (Vandenberghe, 2014), I have sketched out some arguments for a metacritical theory that joins Roy Bhaskar’s robust ontology with Jürgen Habermas’s moral sensibility and Alain Caillé’s spirited defense of convivialism as an ideology for our times.[[5]](#footnote-5) I have now come to think that social theory has to be reconstructive rather than critical, hopeful rather than desperate, joyous rather than depressed. If we want to change the world, *pace* Marx, we have to start with offering another interpretation of it. Adding a zest of Luhmann’s systems theory and Foucault’s genealogy to the edifice of critical theory in order to show that domination is now on the verge of becoming total and totalitarian is not constructive. It “closes the system”. It is only if we can indicate a path towards a real transformation of culture, society and personality, all at once, to invoke the triad that Parsons borrowed from Pitirim Sorokin (1947), that we perhaps can move from the hermeneutics of suspicion to the propaedeutic of liberation. As I indicated in my metacritique of reification, everything depends on the concept of action one retains in one’s theory construction. If one strips action of its symbolic, normative and expressive dimensions and retains only its instrumental-strategic dimension, reducing it, thus, to a form a practical utilitarianism, reification will necessarily ensue, the diagnosis of social pathology being already built in its premises. This metatheoretical conclusion still stands in my opinion. I would now only add that the concept of individual and collective action one works with depends ultimately on the kind of person one is (or wants to be) and on the society one wants to live in (or actually lives in).

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1. Email: Frederic@iesp.uerj.br. Personal webpage : http://frederic.iesp.uerj.br/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a representative overview of new research on reification Germany and France, see respectively Friesen et al. 2012 and Chanson et al., 2014. Interestingly, in a reflection on the “reification of language” after the linguistic turn, Rorty (1991) draws on the same authors. To criticize the transcendentalization of the conditions of possibility of experience, he plays out the late Wittgenstein and the young Heidegger against the mysticism of the late Heidegger. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Apart from the usual extensions of reification theory to race, ethnicity and gender, political communities, property rights, etc., a new, more technical use of the concept of reification has recently emerged in computer sciences (“functorial approach to reification”, “compositional reification”), artificial intelligence (“reified temporal logic”) and mathematics (“transformation of operations into functions in algebraic reasoning”). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The exact formulation is the following: "Marxism remains the philosophy of our time. We cannot go beyond it, because we have not overcome the circumstances that engendered it" (Sartre, 1960: 29). Meanwhile, the circumstances have changed, not because capitalism has been vanquished, but because with the fall of real existing socialism and the demise of the working class, we no longer believe that History can be driven forward in authoritarian fashion. Against Sartre, but with Marcel Gauchet (2007, I: 16), we therefore propose that democracy has become the unsurpassable horizon of our times (though, of course, there may be others, and perhaps the task of the intellectual is not only to open a new window, but to actively explore the possibility of multiple horizons). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The original version of the book was published in the Bibliothèque du MAUSS (an acronym for the Mouvement Anti-Utilitaire dans les Sciences Sociales). While both Habermas and Bhaskar are amply covered in the book, Alain Caillé’s (2009) anti-utilitarian anthropology of the gift is not, or certainly not sufficiently. The *Manifeste convivialiste* (Convivialistes, 2013), co-written and signed by some 50 francophone intellectuals (Alain Caillé, Edgar Morin, Ahmet Insel and myself among others), will soon also be available in Turkish. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)